The Midwife’s Apprentice

She is a homeless, nameless nobody. To survive, she must become herself.

Adapted by Bryon Cahill and Debbie Nevins from the novel by Karen Cushman
Illustrations by David Ho

CHARACTERS
(main characters in boldface)

Storytellers 1, 2
Narrators 1, 2, 3
Will Russet, a boy
Woman/Jane Sharp, a midwife
Brat/Beetle/Alyce, the midwife’s apprentice
Miller
Miller’s wife
Merchant
Man
Calf 1, 2
Bailiff
Joan, the bailiff’s wife
Matthew Blunt
Magister Reese

SCENE 1: The Dung Heap
An English village, 14th century

Storyteller 1: When animal droppings and garbage and spoiled straw are piled up in a great heap, the rotting gives forth heat. Usually no one gets close enough to notice because of the stench. But the girl noticed. On that frosty night, she had burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, heedless of the smell. She was used to it.

Storyteller 2: She was small and pale, with the frightened air of an ill-used child, but her scrawny, underfed body did give off a hint of woman, so perhaps she was 12 or 13. No one knew for sure, least of all the girl herself, who knew no home and no mother and no name but Brat.

Narrator 1: Morning brings the kick of a boot in Brat’s belly.
Will Russet: Dung beetle! Dung beetle! Smelly old dung beetle sleeping in the dung!

Narrator 2: Boys. In every village there are boys—teasing, taunting, pinching, kicking. Always they are the scrawniest or the ugliest or the dirtiest or the stupidest boys. Brat closes her eyes.

Woman: Hey, boys, have off! You’re mucking up the path and my new shoes. Away! ... And you, girl. Are you alive or dead? Alive? Good, then there’s no need to call the bailiff to cart you off. Now out of that heap and away.

Storyteller 2: The woman’s name was Jane. She was known in the village as Jane the Midwife. Because of the woman’s sharp nose and sharp glance, Beetle always thought of her as Jane Sharp.

Storyteller 1: When a new baby was expected in the village, the midwife helped it into the world. In quick time, Beetle became her apprentice. And the midwife gave her a place to sleep that smelled much better than the dung heap, though it was much less warm.

SCENE 2: The Cat

Storyteller 2: Beetle liked to watch the cat stretching in the sunshine. Sometimes she left bits of bread or cheese near the fence post by the river where she first saw him.

Narr 1: One sunny morning, Beetle heads for the river. As she gets closer, she hears the cat hissing and screaming. One of the boys who had taunted her is holding the cat by his tail. His friends are cheering him on.

Will: Into the sack with him, Jack! We will see whether a cat can best an eel.

vocab
Wimple: a woman’s head cloth drawn in folds about the chin
Midwife: a person who assists women in childbirth
Apprentice: an assistant, usually one who is learning the trade
**SCENE 3:** The Miller’s Wife

**Storyteller 1:** Jane Sharp became a midwife because she had broken her ankle. Over the next few days, she cleans his wounds and feeds him scraps from her meals.

**Storyteller 2:** Taking Beetle gave her cheap labor and an apprentice too stupid and scared to be any competition.

**Narr 2:** Jack tosses the sack with eel and cat into the pond. After a time, the tumbling sack sinks into the reedy water and all is still.

**Will:** Ah, Jack, you were right. The eel took that cat right down.

**Narr 3:** A boy with a runny nose gives two apples to a boy with broken teeth, and they all run off. Beetle waits a long time before she comes out of hiding, wades into the muddy pond, and drags the sack out of the water.

**Beetle:** Cat, are you drowned? I’d open the sack to let you out, but I be sore afraid of the eel. Cat? Cat, are you drowned? I’d open the sack out of the water. A boy with a runny nose gives two apples to a boy with broken teeth, and they all run off.

**Narr 1:** After getting up her courage, Beetle opens the sack. The eel comes tumbling out and拖s back into the water.

**Narr 2:** The miller slaps the miller’s wife hard across the face until the woman stops screaming. Beetle huddles in a corner. After the baby is born, the midwife spies her there.

**Jane:** Idiot! Clothed! Good-for-nothing nincompoop!

**Narr 3:** As night begins to fall, the midwife drags Beetle back to their hut.

**SCENE 4:** The Naming

**Storyteller 2:** Soon it was high summer, and Beetle journeyed to Gobnet-Under-Green to attend the Saint Swithin’s Day Fair. She went to buy provisions for Jane, because Jane had broken her ankle and could not go herself.

**Storyteller 1:** At the fair, Beetle passed in awe among the bright booths with flags and pennants flying. She laughed at the puppets and wondered at the soothsayers. She sniffed spices from faraway lands and smelled pies stuffed with pork and raisins.

**Narr 1:** At one booth, Beetle gaffes a carved wooden comb. She has never combed her hair with anything but her fingers. Watching her, the friendly merchant gives her the comb.

**Merchant:** (winking) Comb those long curls till they shine, girl, and for sure the boys will come running.

**Narr 3:** He thrusts a piece of leather with marks on it under Beetle’s eyes.

**Man:** Alyce, here, what do this say? This be my winnings on the horse races. Read them to me so Cob the Groom can’t cheat me.

**Beetle:** I’m not Alyce.

**Man:** Course you are.

**Narr 1:** The man leans in closer.

**Man:** Wait, you’re not Alyce! You look like Alyce. Where is Alyce?

**Narr 2:** The man hurries away.

**Storyteller 2:** Beetle stood perfectly still. What a day. She had been winked at, complimented, given a gift, and now mistaken for the mysterious Alyce who could read.

**Beetle:** (looking again at her reflection) This face could belong to someone who could read. And has curls. And could make the boys come running. And this is me, Beetle ... no ... Alyce. This is me, Alyce.

**Storyteller 1:** Not you, me. My name is Jane.

**Narr 3:** The cat purrs again.

**Beetle:** I have a name now, cat. It is Alyce. Not Brat or Dung Beetle or Beetle. Alyce. And now you must have one also. Tell me what name you would like.

**Narr 2:** The cat purrs again.

**Beetle:** Furr? Purr? Furr! Very well then.

**Storyteller 2:** The business of having a name was harder than it seemed. A name was of little use if no one would call you by it — and at first, no one would.

**Storyteller 1:** But every time someone would call her Dung Beetle or Nitwit, the girl would simply state, “Alyce. My name is Alyce.”
cries of some fearsome thing.

**Narr 2:** She follows the howls until she comes upon that red-headed lout, Will, and with him, his cow.

**Will:** Beetle, is that you? You must help me. Tansy has fallen into this pit, and I cannot get her to climb out. She is about to have her calf. Come help me!

**Alyce:** I am no midwife for cows, Will Russet.

**Will:** She needs your help, and so do I ... um, Alyce.

**Alyce:** I do not know what to do.

**Will:** Come down, and I will tell you. This is Tansy’s first calf but not mine.

**Narr 3:** Reluctantly, Alyce climbs into the pit with Will and his cow.

**Will:** Good. Here, hold her head. Keep her quiet. Sing something.

**Alyce:** I do not know any singing, Will Russet.

**Will:** **Croon** a song without words, then. Just make sweet noises.

**Narr 1:** Alyce makes some soothing noises in the cow’s ear.

**Will:** That’s good, Alyce. Keep holding her head. Rub her head and belly. If we can but calm her, God will tell her and the calf what to do.

**Alyce:** **(singing to the cow)** That’s my sweetheart, that’s my good old girl.

**Narr 2:** Reluctantly, Alyce climbs into evening, two calves are born.

**Will:** Twins, Alyce! You have brought me great luck! You have **pluck**, Alyce!

**Narr 1:** Suddenly, Joan shrieks as she thrashes and flails in bed.

**Narr 2:** Alyce doesn’t know the spells or magic that the midwife uses, so she gives Joan mugwort in warm ale to drink. She rubs her forehead and belly gently with warm oil, as she had the cow’s. The long day passes.

**Alyce:** (singing to Joan) That’s my sweetheart, that’s my good old girl.

**Storyteller 1:** So it was that in the middle of the night, a calmer, more rested Joan brought forth a daughter, feet first, whom she called Alyce Little.

**Narr 3:** Alyce washes the babe, wraps her in clean linens, and lays her in her father’s arms. Just then, Jane the Midwife comes bustling up the path and into the cottage.

**Bailiff:** We have no need of you, Joan. Your helper here has taken care of us with her two strong hands and her good common sense.

**Narr 1:** Alyce hides her smile. She needs your help, and so do I ... um, Alyce.

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**Narr 1:** Alyce hides her smile from the jealous and angry midwife.

**Storyteller 1:** That night, Alyce ate some cold soup and hard bread, lay down on her straw mat by the fire, and had a dream about her mother, which upon waking she could not remember.

**Storyteller 7:** The Leaving

**Storyteller 2:** Alyce was sitting by the fire one cool morning, tying up twigs for a broom, when a pounding came at the door.

**Narr 2:** Jane opens the door to young Matthew Blunt.

**Matthew Blunt:** My mum is in need of birthing help. We need for Alyce to come right away.

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Alyce headed away from the village, away from her failure. For hours, where, only that she must run. She didn’t know why or backed out of the cottage and ran. She didn’t know why or back.

Storyteller 2: At that, Alyce took sweeping her way toward him, he looks up.

Magister Reese: You, inn girl, what do you want from life?

Narr 2: No one has ever asked her that before. Alyce spends the afternoon thinking about it. Later, as she serves Magister Reese his cold-beef-and-bread supper, she has her answer.

Magister Reese: (softly) I know what I want. A full belly, a contented heart, and a place in this world.

Magister Reese: You ask a lot for an inn girl. I thought you’d say a sweetheart or a yellow ribbon for your black hair.

Magister Reese: Not so. I want it my way. Babies don’t stop being born because the midwife gives up.

Narr 2: The innkeeper says nothing, and the midwife picks up her things and leaves. On the stairs, Alyce sighs.

Storyteller 2: One day in June, Alyce sat in the meadow and thought. Magister Reese was leaving the inn to return to the lodgings in Oxford he shared with his widowed sister. He offered to employ Alyce to care for his sister, as she was growing old and needed much care. Other wealthy travelers had offered her employment as well.

Storyteller 2: But the innkeeper wanted her to stay, and even offered her a penny now and then if she would agree to remain on. And then there was the midwife.

Magister Reese: (chewing on a blade of grass) What to do? What do I want? Who should I be? I, who was no more than a dung beetle. I, who was unwanted and despised by all.

Midwife roared in, like wind before rain, blasting everyone out of the way as she set about attending to mother and babe.

Storyteller 1: She insulted and encouraged, pushed and poked, brewed and stewed and remedied. Anointing her hands with cornmeal and oil, she rubbed and kneaded, pulled and tugged, and turned that baby from both the inside and the outside until finally he was in a position to come out. Then she slapped Emma’s belly, lifted her to the shoulders, and gave her a good shake.

Narr 3: Finally Alyce hears the cries of a baby, the moans of a tired mother, and the laughter of a contented cat. The innkeeper says noth-

Magister Reese: No, this is what I want, but it is my misfortune instead to be hungry, sad, and too stupid to be a midwife’s apprentice.

Narr 3: Then the midwife gives up. Babies don’t stop being born, no matter how much care and attention the midwife offers. Magister Reese was not what I needed. She gave up. I need an apprentice who can do what I tell her, take what I give her, who can try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. Babies don’t stop being born because the midwife gives up.

Narr 1: I have heard rumors that my former apprentice is here. Alyce: I am nothing. I have nothing. I can do nothing and learn nothing. I belong nowhere.

Narr 3: Of course. Of course! Of course! Alyce sat in the meadow and thought. Magister Reese was leaving the inn to return to the lodgings in Oxford he shared with his widowed sister. He offered to employ Alyce to care for his sister, as she was growing old and needed much care. Other wealthy travelers had offered her employment as well.

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Magister Reese: (smiling) Not so. I want it my way. Babies don’t stop being born because the midwife gives up.

Narr 2: The door opens. Alyce goes in. And the orange cat goes with her.